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Rational Fascism

Excerpted from Chapter 1 of *Blackshirts and Reds*

While walking through New York's Little Italy, I passed a novelty shop that displayed posters and T-shirts of Benito Mussolini giving the fascist salute. When I entered the shop and asked the clerk why such items were being offered, he replied, "Well, some people like them. And, you know, maybe we need someone like Mussolini in this country." His comment was a reminder that fascism survives as something more than a historical curiosity.

Worse than posters or T-shirts are the works by various writers bent on "explaining" Hitler, or "reevaluating" Franco, or in other ways sanitizing fascist history. In Italy, during the 1970s, there emerged a veritable cottage industry of books and articles claiming that Mussolini not only made the trains run on time but also made Italy work well. All these publications, along with many conventional academic studies, have one thing in common: They say little if anything about the class policies of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. How did these regimes deal with social services, taxes, business, and the conditions of labor? For whose benefit and at whose expense? Most of the literature on fascism and Nazism does not tell us.(1)

Plutocrats Choose Autocrats

Let us begin with a look at fascism's founder. Born in 1883, the son of a blacksmith, Benito Mussolini had an early manhood marked by street brawls, arrests, jailings, and violent radical political activities. Before World War I Mussolini was a socialist. A brilliant organizer, agitator, and gifted journalist, he became editor of the Socialist Party's official newspaper. Yet many of his comrades suspected him of being less interested in advancing socialism than in advancing himself. Indeed, when the Italian upper class tempted him with recognition, financial support, and the promise of power, he did not hesitate to switch sides.

By the end of World War I, Mussolini, the socialist, who had organized strikes for workers and peasants had become Mussolini, the fascist, who broke strikes on behalf of financiers and landowners. Using the huge sums he recieved from wealthy interests, he projected himself onto the national scene as the acknowledged leader of i fasci di combattimento, a movement composed of black-shirted ex-army officers and sundry toughs who were guided by no clear political doctrine other than a militaristic patriotism and conservative dislike for anything associated with socialism and organized labor. The fascist Blackshirts spent their time attacking trade unionists, socialists, communists, and farm cooperatives.

After World War I, Italy had settled into a pattern of parliamentary democracy. The low pay scales were improving, and the trains were already running on time. But the capitalist economy was in a postwar recession. Investments stagnated, heavy industry operated far below capacity, and corporate profits and agribusiness exports were declining.

To maintain profit levels, the large landowners and industrialists would have to slash wages and raise prices. The state in turn would have to provide them with massive subsidies and tax exemptions. To finance this corporate welfarism, the populace would have to be taxed more heavily, and social services and welfare expenditures would have to be drastically cut--measures that might sound familiar to us today.

But the government was not completely free to pursue this course. By 1921, many Italian workers and peasants were unionized and had their own political organizations. With demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, factory takeovers, and the forceable occupation of farmlands, they had won the right to organize, along with concessions in wages and work conditions.

To impose a full measure of austerity upon workers and peasants, the ruling economic interests would have to abolish the democratic rights that helped the masses defend their modest living standards. The solution was to smash their unions, political organizations, and civil liberties. Industrialists and big landowners wanted someone at the helm who could break the power of organized workers and farm laborers and impose a stern order on the masses. For this task Benito Mussolini, armed with his gangs of Blackshirts, seemed the likely candidate.(2)

In 1922, the Federazione Industriale, composed of the leaders of industry, along with representatives from the banking and agribusiness associations, met with Mussolini to plan the "March on Rome," contributing 20 million lire to the undertaking. With the additional backing of Italy's top military officers and police chiefs, the fascist "revolution"—really a coup d'etat—took place.

Within two years after seizing state power, Mussolini had shut down all opposition newspapers and crushed the Socialist, Liberal, Catholic, Democratic, and Republican parties, which together had commanded some 80 percent of the vote. Labor leaders, peasant leaders, parliamentary delegates, and others critical of the new regime were beaten, exiled, or murdered by fascist terror squadristi. The Italian Communist Party endured the severest repression of all, yet managed to maintain a courageous underground resistance that eventually evolved into armed struggle against the Blackshirts and the German occupation force.

In Germany, a similar pattern of complicity between fascists and capitalists emerged. German workers and farm laborers had won the right to unionize, the eight-hour day, and unemployment insurance. But to revive profit levels, heavy industry and big finance wanted wage cuts for their workers and massive state subsidies and tax cuts for themselves.

During the 1920s, the Nazi Sturmabteilung or SA, the brown-shirted Stormtroopers, subsidized by business, were used mostly as an anti-labor paramilitary force whose function was to terrorize workers and farm laborers. By 1930, most of the tycoons had concluded that the Weimar Republic no longer served their needs and was too accommodating to the working class. They greatly increased their subsidies to Hitler, propelling the Nazi party onto the

national stage. Business tycoons supplied the Nazis with generous funds for fleets of motor cars and loudspeakers to saturate the cities and villages of Germany, along with funds for Nazi party organizations, youth groups, and paramilitary forces. In the July 1932 campaign, Hitler had sufficient funds to fly to fifty cities in the last two weeks alone.

In that same campaign the Nazis received 37.3 percent of the vote, the highest they ever won in a democratic national election. They never had a majority of the people on their side. To the extent they had any kind of reliable base, it generally was among the more affluent members of society. In addition, elements of the petty bourgeoisie and many lumpenproletariats served as strongarm party thugs, organized into the SA stormtroopers. But the great majority of the organized working class supported the Communists or Social Democrats to the very end.

In the December 1932 election, three candidates ran for president: the conservative incumbent Field Marshal von Hindenburg, the Nazi candidate Adolph Hitler, and the Communist Party candidate Ernst Thaelmann. In his campaign, Thaelmann argued that a vote for Hindenburg amounted to a vote for Hitler and that Hitler would lead Germany into war. The bourgeois press, including the Social Democrats, denounced this view as "Moscow inspired." Hindenburg was re-elected while the Nazis dropped approximately two million votes in the Reichstag election as compared to their peak of over 13.7 million.

True to form, the Social Democrat leaders refused the Communist Party's proposal to form an eleventh-hour coalition against Nazism. As in many other countries past and present, so in Germany, the Social Democrats would sooner ally themselves with the reactionary Right than make common cause with the Reds.(3) Meanwhile a number of right-wing parties coalesced behind the Nazis and in January 1933, just weeks after the election, Hindenburg invited Hitler to become chancellor.

Upon assuming state power, Hitler and his Nazis pursued a politico-economic agenda not unlike Mussolini's. They crushed organized labor and eradicated all elections, opposition parties, and independent publications. Hundreds of thousands of opponents were imprisoned, tortured, or murdered. In Germany as in Italy, the communists endured the severest political repression of all groups.

Here were two peoples, the Italians and Germans, with different histories, cultures, and languages, and supposedly different temperaments, who ended up with the same repressive solutions because of the compelling similarities of economic power and class conflict that prevailed in their respective countries. In such diverse countries as Lithuania, Croatia, Rumania, Hungary, and Spain, a similar fascist pattern emerged to do its utmost to save big capital from the impositions of democracy.(4)

1. Among the thousands of titles that deal with fascism, there are a few worthwhile exceptions that do not evade questions of political economy and class power, for instance: Gaetano Salvemini, Under the Ax of Fascism (New York: Howard Fertig, 1969); Daniel Guerin, Fascism and Big Business (New York: Monad Press/Pathfinder Press, 1973); James Pool and Suzanne Pool, Who Financed Hitler (New York: Dial Press, 1978); Palmiro Togliatti, Lectures on Fascism (New York: International Publishers, 1976); Franz Neumann, Behemoth (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944); R. Palme Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution (New York: International Publisher, 1935).

2. Between January and May 1921, "the fascists destroyed 120 labor headquarters, attacked 243 socialist centers and other buildings, killed 202 workers (in addition to 44 killed by the police and gendarmerie),

and wounded 1,144." During this time 2,240 workers were arrested and only 162 fascists. In the 1921-22 period up to Mussolini's seizure of state power, "500 labor halls and cooperative stores were burned, and 900 socialist municipalities were dissolved": Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution, 124.

3. Earlier in 1924, Social Democratic officials in the Ministry of Interior used Reichswehr and Free Corps fascist paramilitary troops to attack left-wing demonstrators. They imprisoned seven thousand workers and suppressed Communist Party newspapers: Richard Plant, The Pink Triangle (New York: Henry Holt, 1986), 47.

4. This is not to gainsay that cultural differences can lead to important variations. Consider, for instance, the horrific role played by anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany as compared to fascist Italy.

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